



The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

August 21, 2023

Dear Secretary Buttigieg:

The Wilderness Society is writing in support of the North Carolina Department of Transportation's (NCDOT's) "Greater Rural Access and Highways to Accelerate Mobility" project ("GRAHAM" or "the Project") application for USDOT Rural Program funds. The Project will invest in the development of a 12-mile portion of Corridor K of the Appalachian Development Highway System (ADHS) in Graham County, North Carolina, one of the last sections of the ADHS to be completed. Consistent with the ROUTES Initiative, the Project has been developed to address this rural corridor's unique challenges while delivering on USDOT's priority transportation goals of safety, mobility, and economic competitiveness.

The Project improves travel reliability and emergency response by addressing topographic challenges with climbing and passing lanes along NC 143 and NC 28, between Robbinsville and the Stecoah Valley. It expands active transportation access to Federal lands used for recreation by constructing new sidewalks, a multi-use path, and a new land bridge that will allow pedestrians and wildlife to safely cross NC 143. The Project will also improve access to the area's significant natural areas, supporting the local recreational/tourism economy. ITS enhancements built into the Project will help to overcome the area's "remoteness" by providing tools for managing emergencies and road closures along US 19/74, which occur frequently due to flooding, downed trees, and geotechnical failures. US 129, NC 143, and NC 28 are vital detours, but with only a single lane in each direction and inadequate communications to travelers, any increased traffic along the route leads to congestion and travel delays.

Collectively, these individual investments will work together to modernize one of the last segments of the ADHS Corridor K, addressing multiple national goals (23 U.S. C. § 150) and mitigating system vulnerabilities by improving the safety, condition, and reliability of the corridor. By investing in the delivery of these outcomes, the Project supports the economic vitality of this tourist-dependent economy. Without a Rural grant, construction cost increases will delay the delivery of these improvements to ADHS Corridor K. The Project is tailored to this remote area's specific needs through an engaged collaboration between NCDOT, FHWA, ARC, Southwestern Rural Planning Organization, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, Graham and Cherokee County Commissioners and County Managers, and the Graham County Economic Development Director.

The Project provides all of the above benefits while simultaneously minimizing loss of the values provided by the surrounding natural areas. Infrastructure projects can inadvertently harm ecosystem

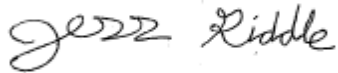
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services such as clean water supply, plant and animal habitat, and recreational and spiritual benefits provided by natural areas. The area surrounding the Project is especially sensitive due to steep slopes, exceptional biodiversity, and increasingly rare opportunities for solitude. Indeed, the area's natural beauty drives the local tourism industry and significantly contributes to quality of life.

The Project avoids impacting scenery or fragmenting natural habitats by confining construction to the existing road corridors. That approach also minimizes impacts to soils and streams. The new land bridge will also improve the experience of hikers on the Appalachian Trail and help keep animal populations connected, an increasingly important dynamic as wildlife is forced to move in response to climate change.

For the reasons outlined above, The Wilderness Society strongly encourages you to support the GRAHAM project and NCDOT's application for Federal Rural grant funding, so that NCDOT can improve safe transportation access throughout this rural area and advance completion of Corridor K.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jess Riddle". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Jess Riddle
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